

Born Digital Literature



ENGL 771/871

Topics in Postmodern Lit

Dr. Kenneth Sherwood

Summer Session I: 6/05-7/03

M-R 10:30am-12:40pm

Description

When one first encounters digital literature, getting one's bearing in this new and contested zone can be a challenge. Katherine Hayles' introductory book should help us to start off on the right foot. The creative work that goes on under the labels of e-poetry, hypertext fiction, code poetry, generative text, digital literature, net art, new media etc. is varied. One way to think about the adventure of this course is to imagine that your task is to create a map of an emerging field (or a map of several, overlapping and contested fields) for yourself.

Literature has been directly engaged with technological change and its mediation of language for at least the duration of the modernist period—from telegraph, radio, magazine, newspaper and book typesetting, to the fax, tv, personal computer, desktop publishing, networking, and digital multi-media production. If we remember that alphabetic writing and the printing press are themselves technologies, then this engagement with change dates back even further. In this course, we will consider the poetics of born-digital literature from experiential (readerly), aesthetic, theoretical, and historical perspectives.

I hope to acquaint you with 21st-century digital literary practices, leading you toward becoming a fluent reader/viewer/user, while buttressing these engagements with research into the development of textual art in new environments. Our foci will oscillate between close encounters with born-digital artifacts and more distanced reflections on theoretical and historical issues—supported by assigned critical readings, student presentations, and collaboration. We will communally work through a number emerging E-lit “classics” and “foundational” critical texts with the aim of enabling you to develop a conceptual framework for producing review-quality critical writing about digital literature and sufficient expertise to introduce it into your teaching.

On Practice

Most digital writers today are self-taught; in the US, there is only one MFA in digital writing per se (Brown University). This lack of formal educational programs (and the small market share of E Lit) may actually contribute positively to the dynamic, innovative nature of the work. To some extent, digital creative writers are

inventing as they go. So, we will also engage in some very basic “hands-on” practice in digital composition. Exploratory practice will give you insights into the pleasures and challenges of making born-digital literature.

On the Postmodern

The scope and definition of postmodernism remains contested after 40 years. It has been discussed in terms of everything from an aesthetic “style” to a historical period. It can be viewed as an extension of modernism or its rejection. Within poetry and literature, we often describe something as postmodern when it seems to question or playfully subvert accepted norms (theme, style, form), reflect an altered sense of the subject (perhaps substituting multiple or plural subjectivities), or self-consciously test literary boundaries. Of course, this description might also seem to match many modernist works such as Pound's *Cantos*, Woolf's *Waves*, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*.

The critic Marjorie Perloff likes to quote poet David Antin's quip that “From the modernism that you want you get the postmodernism you deserve” – to suggest the shifting or relativity in the boundaries between these broad periods/styles; Perloff herself has been among the foremost scholars interrogating and reexamining these boundaries in terms of specific writers, most recently in her book *Twenty First Century Modernism: the “New” Poetics*.

Near the end of his life, modernist poet Ezra Pound wrote in the 116th Canto of his unfinished, 800 page, book length poem (1915-1962)

*Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me,
And I am not a demigod,
I cannot make it cohere.*

One way of thinking about postmodern poetics would be to imagine a writer simply letting go of that assumption that “it” should or could cohere.

In as sense, I'm suggesting a way through this labyrinth is to think about how post-structuralist ideas about language reshape our ideas about the self, meaning, and form. After Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Butler, Deleuze, Jameson, and Lyotard – we cannot have confidence in: language as a guarantor of stable meanings, the authorial self as the controller of a text, or image of an original text disentangled from a web of intertexts and allusions. (For another poetry class, I summarized some of these attitudes in playful list of “apriorities”: <http://iup771-871-sp2013.wikispaces.com/Otherstream+Apriorities>)

Authors of “born digital” texts are often informed by these kinds of concerns AND choose to bring them to bare on the transformed environments of 21st century textuality -- screens, networks, multi-modal environments, collaborative authorship, artificial intelligence, etc. Frame in the starkest and most polemical terms, the “digital writer,” we might say, recognizes the book (or print codex) as a historically bound “program” (writer, interface, publisher, community of readers) that is now undergoing a transformation, for better and worse! Born digital writing

aims to engage that – sometimes in a mood of celebration, sometimes in a spirit of critique, sometimes in with an attitude of confusion and wonder.

When I taught my first course in postmodern poetry back in 1999, I chose to quickly pivot away from the theoretical generalizations about “the postmodern” and to focus on concrete poems, which clarified, enriched and complicated the terms. This still seems to me the best way to approach a “topic” in postmodernism such as Born Digital Literature. I look forward to the exploration!

(For students desiring more insight into the terms and debates, Martin Irvine's web essay provides a longer overview, good bibliography, and a useful table summarizing some oppositions between modernism and postmodernism: “The Postmodern, Postmodernism, Postmodernity: Approaches to Po-Mo”:
<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/pomo.html>

Born Digital Literature Sources

Electronic Literature Collection. Volume One, October 2006. College Park, Maryland: Electronic Literature Organization. ISSN: 1932-2011
<http://collection.eliterature.org/1/>

Electronic Literature Collections. Volume Two, February 2011. College Park, Maryland: Electronic Literature Organization. ISSN: 1932-2011
<http://collection.eliterature.org/2/>

Electronic Literature Collections. Volume Three, February 2016. Cambridge, Mass.: Electronic Literature Organization. ISSN: 1932-2016
<http://collection.eliterature.org/3/>

Primary Critical Texts

Hammond, Adam. Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction. Cambridge UP, 2016.

Hayles, N. Katherine. Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary. Notre Dame, IN, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Additional Critical Texts are found at the back of the syllabus.

Requirements/Assignments

Participation: 20%

+ Oral, in-class Discussion / Mediated Communication

Graduate seminars are the most productive when all students arrive to class prepared, having completed and reflected upon the reading. I look for your active, engaged, and generously community-minded dialogue with classmates. We will discuss, explore, even articulate our differences in a spirit of respectful inquiry. I do not require that you be an expert or that you pontificate! **I do expect you to contribute every class meeting.** If you are shy about speaking or intimidated by some of your classmates: you may use the Twitter feed; we may also decide to use discussion forums within our class website.

+ Twitter Feed

In lieu of nightly reading responses, I will ask you to tweet at least once a day. This is a new experiment. It may fail. Participation at a minimal level ensures you full credit. You will need to "follow" @iupelit in order that I can find all your posts. When you want the class as a whole to read, you will use this hash tag "#iupelit". Your posts should pertain to class content in some way. You may:

ask questions

offer observations

seek or offer help

provide links for additional resources

other pleasing interventions

Born-Digital Experiment 10%

This is an opportunity to get a taste of creating a literary text in a new media environment. I will introduce you to a simple, hypertext/interactive-fiction editor called Twine. We will discuss options. Some of you may become more experimental and learn about Processing/P5js, create your own Twitter Bot, or ...?

You can create an original text or remix / remediate other literary texts. The emphasis will be on using this as a hands-on exploration. Some of my favorite student projects in the past have been decidedly "low tech." The point is to investigate the relationship between content and medium for yourself. Your project should exhibit a critical intelligence, verbal innovation, and thoughtful exploration of the chosen media. It does not have to be perfect or publishable. You do not need any prior technological skills. We will present these in class; and you will submit your work with a brief (1-2 page reflection on your process,

struggles, and what you discovered in making your experiment).

Critical Writing / Presentations 40%

Each student will sign up to take turns presenting on readings and literary works studied by the class. Your contributions will include a posted “wiki page” and a presentation / leading of discussion during class time.

**Given the number of students in the class and number of class meetings, we will negotiate on the number of presentations and whether these should be individual or completed in groups.*

1. *Critical Article Presentation (CAP):*

- a.) prepare a summary (1-2 paragraphs),
- b.) commentary, and
- c.) discussion question for one of the **primary critical readings** (i.e. an assigned reading) of the day (250 word maximum).

You may choose to limit your presentation to the assigned article, or you may address broader issues if warranted. (Some classes there may be additional readings assigned; you are not required to include them.) **This should be posted to the wiki by 9pm the day prior to class *** (Tweet the wiki page URL to #iupelit as well.) Please DO NOT read your post verbatim as a presentation.

2. *Media Specific Analysis (MSA):* choose an assigned digital literary work from and prepare a 5-10 minute presentation (and associated wiki page) to share with the class, reflecting upon the digital artwork assigned for the day. Your aim is to:

- a.) introduce and situate the work (providing a context in relation to key issues in digital literature and theory),
- b.) demonstrate selected dimensions / affordance (How does one play, read, operate it?)
- c.) and provide a brief analysis or interpretation.

When possible, you should also seek to connect your presentation with ongoing class discussion and gesture towards how it might be taught in a H.S. or college classroom.

- You will sign up well in advance of your presentation date;
- You must **select the work and post the title and link to the wiki at three days in advance; selections are first come, first served. You may not duplicate a selection someone else has chosen.**

When your MSA is complete, you should share it as a page on the wiki.
(Tweet the wiki page URL to #iupelit as well.)*

Final/Formal Project 30% (Choose ONE)

1. A critical essay (10-12pp.) that explores a key issue, offering interpretation of at least one born-digital literary work, contextualized in relation to the discourse of new media poetics. The essay should be theorized and aspire to intervene in the discourse of electronic literature. Bibliography should include course works and additional research (see suggested sources at the end of this syllabus). You MAY choose to treat digital literary works that are on the syllabus, but if you focus on such a work, you must significantly develop an analysis beyond what we cover in class.

OR

2. Pedagogy Project. A Teaching Guide that presents at least four literary examples, with appropriate lesson plan: activities, concept definitions, discussion questions, bibliography of links, etc. The guide should be equivalent in work and length to option 1 above. This should be a practical, web-published resource that could reasonably serve teachers of advanced, high school or introductory, college classes. (If you choose this option, you should mount it on the web; I will encourage you to leave it there, after the class ends -- but that will be your choice).

Be prepared to share your work with the class during one of the last two meetings.

Media in the course

Interested and capable students are encouraged to explore and integrate non-print media into their coursework. I recognize that students may bring varied media and technology skills to the class, and do not want to disadvantage those who are new-media "freshman" even as I regret the schedule and scope of this course do not allow us to schedule class studio time. However, I would still like to emphasize the value of applied investigation of new media. You may find that even the most primitive experiment will provide you with a learning experience!

RULES

People get sick, automobiles break down, etc. However, since we meet only 19 times, you will be allowed two absences. Additional absences will result in a 5% deduction from your final average. There are few deadlines in this course; you must meet them or lose 5% per day late.

Academic Dishonesty is a serious matter. I am savvy and vigilant in detecting

students who use unattributed web sources or utilize other "clever" methods to enhance their grades. Take the grade you honestly earn on an assignment. Should a classmate attempt to use your work, refuse; I make no distinction between cheaters and those who aid them. A plagiarized assignment will earn you a zero for the assignment. As appropriate, we can discuss the possibility of collaborative work (in which all participants are named and credited.)

Additional Critical Sources

- Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1997.
- Amerika, Mark, *Meta/data : A Digital Poetics* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2007)
<<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10190449>>
- Amerika, Mark. *Remix: The Book*. Minneapolis: U Minn P, 2011.
- Ciccoricco, David, *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa, AL, USA: University of Alabama Press, 2007)
<<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10225584>>
- Drucker, Johanna, *SpecLab : Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 2009)
<<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10317905>>
- 'EBR | Electronic Book Review' <<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/>> [accessed 29 May 2014]
- 'Electronic Literature Organization' <<http://eliterature.org/>> [accessed 29 May 2014]
- Funkhouser, Christopher, *Modern and Contemporary Poetics : Prehistoric Digital Poetry : An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* (Tuscaloosa, AL, USA: University of Alabama Press, 2007)
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10387764>
- Hayles, N. Katherine, *Electronic Literature : New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008)
<<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10423353>>
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Mediaworks MIT, 2002.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing*. Columbia U P, 2011.
- 'I ♥ E-Poetry | Short-Form Scholarship on Born-Digital Poetry and Poetics.'
<http://iloveepoetry.com/> [accessed 29 May 2014]
- Kac, Eduardo, ed., *Media Poetry : An International Anthology* (Bristol, GBR: Intellect Ltd., 2007)
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10202471>
- Kwastek, Katja, 'Geopoetics: Aesthetic Experience in Teh Works of Stefan Schemat and Teri Rueb', in *Literary Art in Digital Performance : Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism* (New York, NY, USA: Continuum International Publishing, 2009)

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10427611>

Landow, George. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. Johns Hopkins, 1992, 1997, 2006.

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT, 2001.

Morris, Adelaide, and Thomas Swiss, eds., *New Media Poetics : Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2006)

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10173714>

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. MIT, 1997.

Raley, Rita, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10318103>

Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10173891>

Stallman, Richard, 'The Gnu Manifesto', in *The New Media Reader*, ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), pp. 543-50

Schreibman, Susan, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth (eds). *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*. Blackwell Publishing, 2016.

Turkle, Sherry, 'Video Games and Computer Holding Power', ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), pp. 499-513

Turkle, Sherry. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. MIT 1984/2005.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, *Expressive Processing : Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cumberland, RI, USA: MIT Press, 2009)

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/indianauniv/docDetail.action?docID=10519786>